

This is “Rural Sunday,” a day set aside for us to remember the beginnings of our church on the American frontier in the 19th century. I have never been in a church where Rural Sunday was made into a great occasion, nothing besides a picnic on the grounds perhaps, but some congregations may do special services, maybe a Sunday afternoon or evening service with old-time gospel singing and guest preachers. Now, before you start thinking how wonderful that might be, realize that I am talking about what would have been in the old days a two or three hour worship service. Is that what you really want? I have heard of some places where the people even dressed the part, heavy black wool suits and velvet dresses, or in some cases, the genuine farm look: ladies in bonnets and simple calico dresses and the men in their “overhauls.” The teens and children would be dressed mainly as they are today- just add the cell phones and i-pods.

I am truly glad for those old-timers. You really have to hand it to them, it must have been an incredible amount of work to go to church in those days, and from those spread-out locations. Hitch up the team and round up the kids, load up the food Mom had prepared- I’m assuming that they wouldn’t have ridden a couple of hours to church and not made it a worship time and a fellowship and eating

time. And then the long trip back home that evening where they had to unhitch the team, rub down and feed the horses, mend the harness, or anything that might have got broken. A lot of work, though I don't know that they thought of it that way. They didn't know anything different. They certainly couldn't just turn the key and step on the gas. And they probably felt they had no option. They wanted to attend church, they needed the fellowship of others, they needed to worship- they would have wanted to give thanks for the bounteous land, and to ask God's protection from accident, from storm and drought and natives. They were planting the seeds of civilization in the wild new world, and it would be a great deal of labor, but they weren't afraid of work.

The parable of the sower surely is the perfect sermon text for Rural Sunday. It isn't the lectionary reading, but it is something agricultural, and it may remind us of those old days when most of us were people of the soil and would have understood that some parts of a cultivated field would produce more abundantly than other parts. But for all the discussion in the parable about the four kinds of soil, the parable is only secondarily about dirt. It is the sower who is important, this Sower who labors in the field.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all have this as the first parable of Jesus. It is also the only parable that Jesus explains. In Mark, that explanation comes in verses 13-20, where Jesus tells only his followers the meaning, and describes the various ways people respond to the gospel message. The fundamental point that Jesus explains is this simple sentence, verse 14: the sower sows the word. That is the sower preaches the gospel; everything else takes meaning from that. And it might even mean that all other parables should be contemplated with the understanding that this is the first one- Jesus asks in verse 13, “how will you understand the parables if you don’t get this one?” Mark has two more parables in chapter 4, one about a mustard seed that grows into a large shrub so that all the birds can rest in its shade; and another about plants that sprout and grow, though people don’t know how that happens because the seed remains hidden in the ground. Now, don’t both these parables presuppose the good soil of our parable? don’t both these parables anticipate God’s power to make alive, and the mystery of God’s grace that makes a tree or a harvest of grain where before was only a tiny, hard seed and inanimate soil? And can’t we see this same amazing grace first and foremost in that One who comes sowing the seed? It seems obvious that we are the different soils in the parable with all our pride and selfishness and desires, with all our frailties and

hurts and broken backgrounds. But the sower is the Lord, the Laborer who came preaching the good news, casting seed, and looking for fertile hearts that would blossom in hearing his word of hopefulness and love.

There is a philosophy of life, a theological outlook, and a style of preaching which we could call “human possibility,” that is, its emphasis is upon the human in relation to the divine, rather than the other way around. It has its attractive features, for it may talk about morality and personal piety, and perhaps what the Creator wants for his creatures; it is much of the preaching you may see on TV or read in the popular religious literature. It is big on being happy or getting what God wants you to have, but it is pretty brief on understanding the deep questions about life and death, suffering and intolerance, very little to challenge the listener or the reader to grow and mature. Very little, in other words, about grace. (Though much about what we can supposedly do to get grace.) Very little about how do we live when we aren't happy or successful.

And even when these ministers and authors recount stories of people who have come through suffering, invariably they have found themselves back in the same place where they started, though perhaps with a nicer car or a bigger house, and better friends. Because in the end of all these stories, it's about someone

winning something. Yes, God had heard their prayers and given healing and now they have recommitted their lives to Christ, but it is still all about them, and not about others. Yes, they may have rediscovered the joy of the Lord, but has it led them to loving their enemies?

Our parable today could promote such a misunderstanding of the disciples' life. We read only a few words about the sower, but much more about the four soils, so is this parable about how we react to the seed that is sown? Is it about what we are capable of? No, *it is about this seed within us*- the love of God- that has taken root and become alive and become something new and made us new and vibrant. This seed that has found deep rich earth and made abundance, but not an abundant life for ourselves- not freedom from want, but *has made an abundant harvest, 30x, and 60x, and 100x, for the One who has sown the seed.* Let us not forget that the seed belongs to the sower, and so then, the grain of the harvest, and truly, even the soil- us!- belongs to the sower. Let us remember that this Sower has planted not just his words in us, but also his sacrifice, his obedience, his compassion for others. And so it all comes down to the grace of the One who loves us; and we can only be thankful for whatever comes to us; and with humility,

then, strive to bring forth a great harvest of goodness and mercy from the seed of Christ's love that has been put within us.

I have heard and known about so many people who seemingly have it all figured out. And thinking about them, I vacillate between envy and anger. Envy that they are content with their understanding, and anger that they appear to have given up the struggle to go farther. If they are content with their faith as it is, then they may be only the shallow soil of the parable rather than the good soil.

Understand, this is not easy stuff. The gospel may be simple, but the world is hard, and God is complex (God is God!), he moves in mysterious ways. His actions are hidden from us, his words are difficult, they may have many meanings. How could it be otherwise? There are billions of people out there so different from you and me, and the sower is sowing the seed even now in them. And the seed must find that unique context within them that will cause the word to be believed, and cause life to spring forth: faith and life that will give glory to God for the bounty which emanates from it.

In this passage, Jesus begins the parable with a command, "Listen!" And ends the parable with an injunction that we use our ears. If this were easy, I don't

think he would have demanded that his hearers pay such close attention. And if it isn't easy, then we need to keep coming back to it, keep listening for his word to us each new time; keep searching for his meaning, and reflecting in our own minds and hearts to know which kind of soil we are; and striving to be the good soil, striving, like our frontier ancestors of the faith- unafraid of the work. Because God wants more than easy answers and quick acquiescence, demands more than superficial obedience. God wants, rather, the produce of our lives- 30x and 60x and 100x- *the abundant harvest of a life that shows his grace in us by our mercy and kindness to others*; his word that has found a home in the deep soil of warm hearts and that germinates into beautiful blooms that others may see, and thus, know that a Lord has come to sow in them seeds of grace that can answer their hurts and fears, and become in them hope and forgiveness and peace. Let ours be hearts that display God's presence.